Viewpoints from Prison

Viewpoint A

**Michael McLean: Thoughts When the Cell Door Closes (Excerpt)**

The cell door shuts with a bang that echoes throughout my shoebox of a cell. The clanging door feeds my ears an all too familiar sound. With a twist of a key I’m locked in. Yes, I’m in my inmate cage for yet another solitude-filled night. I never know what thoughts will surface when the cell door shuts, but it’s fair to say that nine times out of ten nothing out of the ordinary pops into a prisoner’s head. It becomes routine, rather familiar. I know I have to be locked in, and often after a long day, I even welcome the closing of the door. In no way do I confuse welcoming the closing of the door with actually liking the cell—absolutely not. It’s merely that while I’m in prison, I can’t deny the fact that the cell is my pad. Therefore, after contending with various, sometimes hectic, situations during the day, I often welcome the cell, the door’s closing.

I’m human, even though I temporarily live in a cage like an animal. (I am not an animal.) As a person, I need rest and time to unwind from the toil of the day and the madness of the Beast. Out there amongst the prison population, it’s on guard seven days a week, but once inside my cell, I do experience a feeling of safety and comfort. Even if my perceived comfort is a self-induced illusion. I know that no one can get in without the key; therefore I realize I’m relatively safe. . . .

From *Thoughts When the Cell Door Closes*. PEN American Center.

Viewpoint B

**Ernest Rich: Diary Excerpt**

May 15, 2008

They don’t feed (us) much here at Pamlico. We seldom get meat at breakfast. They don’t always serve what is on menu. Eggs and grits. Eggs are not real. Grits are bland. Oatmeal don’t taste like oatmeal. They boil it too long to destroy all the vitamins.

They ruin good food. Boil cabbage in water without meat. Carrots are no good. We haven’t had bananas in a long time. We are not getting vitamins we need. Some men buy from canteen. But I get no money from home. I am 61 and can’t eat a lot of food they serve. Their beef or pork liver mess my stomach up.

I miss homefried potatoes, fried crisp in a cast iron frying pan in lard. I ate fried potatoes at breakfast before I came to prison with eggs and sausage. Strawberry preserves. Tomato soup at breakfast. I’m looking forward to eating real food when I get out. I love tomato juice, grape juice, buttermilk. We never get it in prison. We only get watered down juice. Buttermilk is good for your stomach. The kind of food they serve creates high cholesterol, stomach problems, then the nurse gives you expensive medicine that creates more medical problems.

May 24, 2008

From my window I can see highway, motor homes, motorboats, logging trucks, sometimes farmers are working in field on other side of highway. It is important to me to be able to see the outside world. I’ve been imprisoned for 22 years. I hope to get out some day. I look forward to hiking in the woods. I may walk on the Appalachian Trail. I need to get away from it all, away from people so I can meditate. Be alone with God.

From Diary Excerpt. PEN American Center/Anne Frank Diary Exchange Project.

Viewpoint C

**Sue Ellen Allen: Fear**

It started in Estrella Jail where the incessant noise, violence, hostility, and indifference overwhelmed me. It is a hellish place for a healthy person. Everyone is in black and white stripes, and the conditions breed anxiety and stress. There are rules you don’t even know about, and one hostile officer who is having a bad day can make yours miserable. I was brought up to respect authority and obey the rules, but these girls have no respect for anyone and will “go off” on anybody . . . inmate or guard. There are lock-downs. There is pepper spray. There are brutal searches by the terrifying ”men in black.“ Why? Fights, drugs, who knows? I try to stay in my corner bed and read, read, read so that my mind can escape. The noise continues nightly until well past 3 a.m. and I long for silence. There is no silence. Instead, they yell at each other to be quiet. . . .

Okay. How could I be okay? I had no idea what to expect and no one to ask. I alternated, first shaking and then breaking out in a cold sweat, my heart racing. I later learned that these are panic attacks. I’d never had one before. I’d never seen people treated like this before. Many say they deserve it. Maybe so, but it seems to me if you take a dog and put it in a cage in the backyard, give it really bad food, yell at it all the time and kick it a lot, and then in a year or ten, let it into the house to play with the children, you’re going to have a very angry, very confused, very frightened and hostile dog. That may not be a proper psychological analogy, but that was what I saw around me.